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TEACHING CHILDREN TO CHOOSE

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Two years ago I had the opportunity of supplementing my education by acting as chaperon to a group of girls on a "vacation trip." The experience taught me many things, one of which seems a propos of my point here. It was our plan that, when we stopped at a hotel or restaurant conducted on the *á la carte* or cafeteria plan, the girls should, with a few restrictions, order each her own meal and pay each her own score. This was intended for the girls' education; it reacted as well for my own. One of the girls was the daughter of the very sensible mother who insists on "only wholesome food for young folks." In her reaction against her mother's very wholesome diet, our Mary would have dined on nothing but dessert had she had unrestricted choice. Another one of the crowd, a girl of thirteen, was suffering her first experience away from her mother. For her to decide what she should eat was a constantly recurring trial until, in her distress over the necessity of choice, poor little Roxanna would have gone hungry had not our Martha taken the responsibility on her slender but capable and experienced shoulders. Martha was trained in the making of decisions for herself and others, and gave her orders with a quiet dispatch which was a lesson to her chaperon as well as to her companions.

We of the English faculty, like the devoted and painstaking mothers of many Roxannas, or the sensible mothers of many Marys, have prepared and served our careful and wholesome diet and placed it before our charges, often, in our thoughtful anxiety, premasticated by footnotes and predigested with analyses. They take the literary nourishment offered docilely enough, not because they enjoy it necessarily, but because they take it for granted that it is somehow for their good, like graham bread and Irish potatoes. Then when left to their own choice, they, like Roxanna, appalled

by the unaccustomed necessity of choice, go mentally hungry unless by some happy chance a literary Martha takes charge of them and with a "Try this" or "Read that" gives them the training that we should have given; or like Mary, reacting against too much wholesomeness, they devote themselves entirely to the frothy and too often indigestible dessert furnished by the popular novel and story magazine. Happily, however, the mothers of Martha are increasing in number among the guardians of our literary taste.

We do not propose, nor is it in our province, to discuss at any length here the methods we have used to present our subject. Undoubted it is, however, that the change of aim will necessitate a radical change of method as well as of material. The anatomical dissection—I had almost said vivisection—of our masterpieces is going out of fashion; and with the passing of the "literary analysis" let us hope fervently for the knell tolling the demise of the "examination" in literature. Strange that one should think of examining his fellow on such a subject, is it not? You read together a great piece of literature, hear together a wonderful symphony, or stand together before a beautiful painting, and, feeling thrilled with appreciation, you turn to your neighbor for his sympathy. "Isn't that splendid?" you whisper, but he regards you critically. "Quiz on it tomorrow, third period," he replies, "and it will be stiff." Yes, you can depend on its being "stiff," for we have grown remarkably clever in this unique art of devising examination questions on the masterpieces. Is it any wonder that, before a pupil begins a piece of work for class study, he knows he will not like it? The finer the passage, the clearer the argument, the keener the humor, the tenderer the pathos, the more justified is he in his anxiety as to what question will be concocted about it in the "test." How many of the books which you read for pleasure in the "harmless enjoyment" of *your* leisure would you care to be examined over? I confess that my leisure would cease to be either harmless or enjoyable flavored with such anticipation. If any proof were necessary that we need something of a drastic change in method, it might be made by a most daring experiment. If one were to select the most popular and sensational novel available and teach it exactly as we have, some of us, been wont to teach

the literature which we hope is to be the lure to tempt our pupils to better reading, would the novel remain, think you, any more popular than we have made *The House of Seven Gables* or *Silas Marner?*

Nevertheless, however we may change our mode, even though we bid farewell to analyses, examinations, and stylistic technicalities, the fact remains that we must make very material changes in the "what" as well as in the "how" of our course. Just what these changes shall be will depend on what we recognize as the aims toward the accomplishment of which we are going to strive. Suppose we are correct in our statement that our aim is twofold: to present literature as the record and interpretation of human life, and to train our pupils to judge for themselves its value and message. The flexibility of program for which we have argued in the preceding paragraphs will tend toward the satisfaction of the second purpose. To accomplish the first aim will mean that the literature taught will need to include much more modern work than it has done in the past. Human life, of which literature is the record and interpretation, did not cease with the death of Shakespeare or of Scott, nor with that of Hawthorne or of Irving. It is not necessary nor is it advisable, as we have seemed to suppose, to wait until a man be dead, and long, long dead, before we attend to his message. There are undoubtedly some writers living whose works will survive the crucial test of time. Undeniably there are many more whose work is essentially of today only, but whose message is very real and vital to the people who are also of today. The world of today is interested more immediately in the great problems which today and tomorrow have to solve, and there is an ever more urgent demand for contemporary literature dealing with those problems. Whether we like it or no, that demand must be met.

To many of our faculty of English teachers this demand, and the necessity of satisfying it, is cause for grave apprehension. What is to become of our "classics"? Perhaps that apprehension is only natural, since teachers of English have been so long trained in the "classics" that these "classics" have become to them very much like the Bible, for the safety of which the rise of modern

science caused such unnecessary fears. Just what is meant by the term is, perhaps, a little vague. Once, partly for my own amusement and partly to help defend myself when charged with possessing iconoclastic tendencies irreverent to the sanctity of the long-established, I asked of an especially wide-awake class of eighth-graders this question: "What do you understand by the classics in literature?" Among other enlightening answers I received these two: this from the son of a college professor of English, "Classics are books your fathers give you and you keep them to give to your children"; and this from a quiet, conscientious girl with "future teacher" written large upon her anxious brow, "Classics are those great pieces of literature considered worthy to be studied in English classes of high school or college." Need I emphasize my point further by asking why you are, why I am, teaching—well, two-thirds of the English in our curriculum? Is it from judgment or from tradition?

It may even be true that we have been guilty of a certain hypocrisy—a perfectly unconscious hypocrisy, doubtless—in regard to our personal attitude toward this question of contemporary literature versus the classics. Is it not possible that some of us have been posing a bit, or aping the pose of the consciously "high-browed," one of interest in nothing except the strictly classic and of infinite scorn for anything approaching the popular? Why not be sincere? This pose is doing not a little toward defeating the accomplishment of the very object we hope to attain. We are anxious to act as literary advisers to these young friends of ours, but they are—we have made them—frankly skeptical of our ability to read anything which they consider readable. The English teacher is a "high-brow," they reason, for she declaims against "modern trash"; therefore anything she recommends may safely be condemned unread. We have their unbounded pity because our interests are so limited by our profession that we cannot enjoy anything "real." They may be amazed, almost shocked, but they will be delighted, nevertheless, to find that the English teacher can laugh at *Penrod* and *Daddy Long-Legs* and enjoy re-reading *The Virginian;* and they will be more ready to believe that other things she recommends may be worth at least a trial.

Then let us face the question frankly and with open mind, confessing that, by fault of method or material or both, we have failed to a great extent to reach in our literature classes the aims we recognize as ideals. Someone has epitomized our fundamental mistake by saying that, instead of "starting where the child is and leading him where we want him to go," we have "started where he is not and have attempted to lead him where he does not want to go." Very clearly, then, our first step must be to find out just where in the literary world the child is. Our psychological advisers agree that especially in the early 'teen age is the bent of the social and moral nature determined by influences of environment. Investigation shows, too, that a vast amount of reading is done during these years. There, then, is our opportunity and our obligation; for then, if ever in his life, the child reads; then his taste is most omnivorous; and then, if ever, must he be taught how to read and what to read. Since children in their early 'teens are found in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades of school, a study of the reading tastes of the pupils of these grades has seemed to be profitable. It was our desire to discover the type of reading done by choice, unprejudiced and undirected, rather than to determine the scope of reading done; so instead of asking for a complete list of books read, we asked for the favorite one and for the reason of the choice. Over one thousand answers were examined. We had hoped for a larger number, but the irregularity of conditions during the fall term probably accounts for the fact that only half of the cards sent out were returned. These, however, were rather widely distributed as to territory covered and diversity of community, coming as they did from "East, West, and New England," from college town, manufacturing center, rural community, and large city.

The overwhelming choice was, of course, fiction. Except for the new war books—Empey's, Depew's, Private Peat's, *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man*, *Who Goes There?*, *The Big Fight*, and others, which really belong in a class by themselves—except for these, only seven pupils of the entire number reporting cited as their favorite a book not fiction. Two boys preferred *Stoddard's Lectures*, one of them because his "highest ambition in life is to travel

and these books give one an idea where to go"; besides, they are "easy out-loud reading." The *National Geographic Magazine* was the favorite of a twelve-year-old boy who does "not read books." A young Jewish boy's choice of *The Young Man Entering Business*, and the choice of two others, *Panama, Past and Present* and *How the World Is Governed*, were interesting as possible indications of prevocational interest. So also were the preferences of two boys, decidedly overage for their grades, who chose books on electricity, *The How and Why of Electricity* and *Young Electrician's Handbook*. The latter boy had, he said, read a number of books on electricity, but this one he knew "most by heart." He later wrote me a letter which sent me scurrying to higher authorities for a translation of language too technical for my intelligence. (That sixteen-year-old boy is in a seventh grade. Is it too much aside from our subject to remark the sinful economic waste there?)

The practically universal choice of fiction might at first seem cause for alarm, might seem to indicate that our literary taste was inclined to be frivolous. We must remember, however, that the questionnaire asked only for the favorite, not for the entire, bill of fare. Most children and many adults chose as their favorite dish a dessert rather than a staple, but that does not necessarily mean that they subsist entirely on ice-cream and plum pudding. After all, need a preference for fiction worry us? Is there, then, no real good to be obtained from the reading of fiction? At the least it affords recreation and entertainment; at the highest it interprets life-problems in such a way as to give us a philosophy of life that is surely character-forming. In between the least and the best are graded values—of history, of geography, of current opinion, of ideals, and a knowledge of peoples, places, and times surely not worthless.

The range in choice of favorite fiction was wide, and varied from *Elsie Dinsmore* and *Tom Swift* to *Les Misérables*, with, it seemed, everything in between. The reasons given for the choices were intensely interesting, and more enlightening than the choices themselves. They served as a guide in making some sort of a generalization and classification of the material. Among the large classes into which they might be divided are those who prefer the

book of their choice because "it is exciting," because of its "adventure" or its "mystery," because "it taught a good lesson," "it had so many interesting characters," or because "it was about a boy or girl of my own age." Frequently there is in the choice or comment an illuminating flash of personality which is delightful. A little city girl writes of *The Girl of the Limberlost*, "I liked it because it seemed so real; some of the things she did I often wanted to do." A girl of fifteen recommends *The Prisoner of Zenda* because "the characters are so wonderful, the plot is so interesting, and the love is so beautiful that it is almost sad"; then adds delightfully, retrieving herself from the charge of sentimentality, "The fights are especially to my liking." Another girl likes *David Copperfield* because it seemed so real. "When I was reading it," she says, "everything else I did was like a dream, and I felt as if I would be wakened up by Betsy Trotwood." The comments on *The Harvester* are very interesting for the reason that in no case does the romance or the mysticism seem to have been the impressive part of the story, as it probably would be to an adult. A girl writes of it, "Everything on the landscape is made more interesting to me." Another recommends it to anyone who likes books "with a variety of movement, some exciting, some smooth." A boy of twelve likes it because he also is "a raiser of herbs," and an older boy says, "I like this book because I like the open; I like to work in the soil." I felt that I should like to become personally acquainted with the twelve-year-old whose "blood boils" over the story of *Kazan*, which is, he says, à "very good book for boys with real red blood in their veins." These are but examples that might be multiplied by the score if time and space permitted.

Among the girls, stories of other girls were popular, especially if there was a moral somewhere about it, "a fine character" or "a good lesson." The introspective and, to us, sentimental somehow fits the temperament of many girls of the early 'teen age, while to boys of the same age the expression of feeling is abhorrent, almost indecent. In no case was a boy found to commit himself to a "girls' book" of this type. A great many girls, on the other hand, frankly prefer boys' books. One girl wrote apologetically, "Maybe I've been unfortunate in my choice of

girls' books but so many of them seem sickly to me." She evidently had not yet reached the moralizing age. Another girl writes, "Boys' books like this one [*Captains Courageous*] have so much more pep." In the first thirty, arranging them in the order of their popularity, scarcely one-fifth were "girls' books," although *Pollyanna* topped the list with 8 per cent of the total choices—by a vote entirely "suffrage." *Tom Sawyer* was second, with 6 per cent, and *Treasure Island* third with 4, about two of the 6 and one of the 4 per cent being girls' choices. *The Girl of the Limberlost*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Little Women*, "Tom Swift Series," *Anne of Green Gables*, *Over the Top*, *Freckles*, and *Tarzan of the Apes* followed, ranging from a little more to a little less than 3 per cent. The others of the first thirty in order of popularity were: "Boy Allies Series," *Just David*, *When a Man's a Man*, *The Secret Garden*, "Rover Boy Series," *The Last of the Mohicans*, "Camp Fire Girl Series," "Boy Scout Series," *Penrod*, *The Harvester*, *Private Peat*, *Captains Courageous*, *The Crisis*, *Heidi*, *The Boarded-up House*, *The Lost Prince*, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, *The Call of the Wild*, *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come*. That will give some idea of the range of choice if we remember that neither the best nor the poorest books chosen as favorites are found on the list of the most popular. A surprising number of pupils were reading, apparently with understanding, books like *Les Misérables*, *Ben Hur*, and *The Fair God;* and fully 60 per cent of the books read were books to be found on approved lists selected by schools or libraries for outside reading—two very encouraging facts which served to counterbalance some other discoveries which the cards made.

Boys' literature is by their own request a literature of action, of adventure. Sometimes, unfortunately, this craving for adventure is satisfied by the "paperback." More often and more unfortunately it is satisfied by the "series." I say more unfortunately because the danger of the "series" drug habit is the greater, being the more insidious; just as the danger that a young mother will dope her child with paragoric is greater than the danger that she will dose it from a bottle red-marked "Poison." These books, the series, are the patent medicines of literature, masquerading as beneficial but making little dope-fiends of their users. Not

only is the number of pupils addicted to this habit alarming, but doubly apalling is the ever-increasing amount of the stuff one finds on the market. The cards of course showed this, but one has only to step into the juvenile section of any bookstore to prove it to himself. Try to purchase a gift for some small nephew or godson and see how these books are forced upon you with the insistence that they are "what the boys all call for." There are *Rover Boys* and *Motor Boys*, *Aeroplane Boys* and *Submarine Boys*, *Boy Scouts* and *Boy Allies*, *Young Trailers* and *Tom Swifts*, with their feminine counterparts, *Little Colonels*, *Camp Fire Girls*, *Elsie Dinsmores*, etc., apparently *ad infinitum*. I actually found on the card of a thirteen-year-old girl this comment on *Elsie Dinsmore:* "Interesting and educating. There is about forty of them and I have read them all." I did not know whether to throw up my hands in horror or to wring them in despair. Imagine wallowing through forty volumes of such slush and living to call it "educating"! My distress was as keen but not quite so hopeless when I read on another card, "I recommend *Elsie Dinsmore* because it is such a sweet and touching book for young girls." For I really think the day is passing when very many girls will confess a taste for quite such sickly sweetness and touching tenderness as the Dinsmore type. There is, in fact, healthy indication of a reaction against the girls' series. On several cards note was made of the fact that one of a series, usually the first, was well liked but the rest were disliked "because of their sameness." "Her character," writes one girl of *Anne of Green Gables*, "was so refreshing and different that I was sorry the author had to make her grow up and all the rest of it. It spoils a story to add so many sequels." We may yet hope for a similar distaste to develop among the boys.

Nevertheless, however greatly I deplore the prevalence of the "series" disease—and I assure you that I am as thoroughly awake to the seriousness of the situation as is the Brooklyn librarian whose interesting diagnosis of the case appeared in the *Journal* last year—yet I am far from advising anything so drastic as a surgical operation. If I were to act as literary physician, I believe I would incline to homeopathy rather than surgery. After all, people's ideas of what constitutes badness in books is as different

as the people themselves. In my catalogue there are many worthless books, vicious merely as all waste is vicious, but few actually bad books that a pupil is likely to run across. Even sensational stories often have some moral qualities—unflinching endurance of pain, resolute determination, and strength of any type are values even in desperado, pirate, or adventurer. In the little college town where I received my careful upbringing stands an old barn, the hay loft of which was once the scene alike of thrilling amateur acrobatics and complicated domestic affairs, and whose low sloping eaves later formed a naturally screened shelf for the private library whose circulation was only among the trusted few who knew the countersign. From what harm the readers of that library were spared only the guardian angel of childhood knows. What lessons, albeit embryonic, of strength, endurance, and courage we received I myself never realized until in a retrospect of later years some of these tabooed heroes stood forth in vivid bas-relief. I am frank to confess that much of the pleasure of the hayloft library came from the fact that it was forbidden; for not all of Eve is buried just outside Eden, and the fruit of the tree is still more tempting if it is forbidden us. There had been, you understand, in our mothers' careful censorship of our reading an unsuccessful attempt at a cure by surgery. The salvation or damnation of all haylofters lies in the ability, however it be developed, to assimilate the good and cast off the bad. That we English teachers have not in the past given ourselves the task of developing this ability is our disgrace. If instead of lifting our hands in horrified "Let it alone!" we had long ago applied ourselves to finding out how we could use the craving for this undesirable matter as a physician uses the symptoms of disease to discover to himself the conditions to be remedied, we should have discovered what better literature we could have prescribed to produce the same results; and, like good homeopaths, giving our prescription in whatever small doses seemed advisable, we might long ago have effected a cure. At the same time that the hayloft library was in circulation we were listening with equal interest to mother, whose custom it was to read aloud in the evenings from Dickens, Scott, and Cooper. Whatever permanent injury was avoided, and whatever cure was effected, the

credit is due to the homeopathic remedy rather than to the surgery attempted. If by their own vote boys demand action and adventure, let us see from their own recommendation what there is to offer: books by Doyle, Dumas, Kipling, Marryat, Connelly, Cooper, Stevenson, Jules Verne, Jack London, and scores of others of whom you and I, orthodox English teachers as we have been, have never heard.

Let me recommend to you the use in your own classes or schools of these "outside reading cards." It will surprise you to find what revelations can be made by these little slips—revelations of the thoroughness or the lack of it that has characterized the previous training in the technicalities of expression, revelations of the power of observation developed, of habits of mind, of methods of study, to say nothing of the revelations of character and personality, of real self. At the beginning of the term the best introduction I have been able to find to individual or to class, to temperament or to intellect, is the first card, which answers the two questions of the questionnaire: "What is your favorite book?" "Why do you recommend it?" It was worthy of note in studying the cards that where the best type of reading had been done the comment was more thoughtful and more carefully expressed. The poorer the choice of reading the more indifferent proved to be the comment and the more negligent the form; even the handwriting seemed to correspond in character to the character of the reading done. It was an illustration of the truth of the statement: "Show me what a man reads, and I'll tell you what he is."

A study of the various methods by which the outside-reading problem is being solved in the different schools over the country would be interesting and valuable just now, it seems to me; especially if in some way an indication could be found of the measure of influence the school is exerting on the choice of books. Besides the filing of the "outside-reading cards" which is in connection with the class work, it has been my custom in the past to ask the pupils in my classes to keep a record through the year of *all* the reading that they do, if possible with a very brief comment on each book, at the close of the year arranging the list in order, with the books they liked best at the head of the list, checking those which

they read because of some influence or pressure which the school brought to bear. This report serves more than one purpose: it trains the pupil to form a more or less definite opinion of what he reads; it develops in him discrimination; it provides me, as from time to time I glance over these literary "diaries," with a sort of thermometer by which I can guage each individual's literary temperature; and, by the scaling and checking at the close of the term, I can form some idea of the amount of influence which has been exerted during the term. As a rule the pupils are very honest about the report—if they were not, of course its object would be defeated—although there always are in each class a few little time-servers who arrange their lists with a view to impressing or pleasing the teacher. The fewer there are of these, the more successful I feel I have been in the term's work. If a number of schools would do this—if *you* would do it in your school, Friend Reader—and would send me the pupils' lists in June, together with a statement of what your school is attempting to do to influence the outside reading, then I would do my level best to put the data together so that it would be of worth to us all, and, the *Journal* "bein' willin'," would publish it. There are doubtless as many ways of managing the outside reading as there are teachers working on the project, but we all have the same "big idea": literature is no longer to be considered what Mr. Opdyke calls "a sublimated pudding to be eaten with delicate relish by the cultured few," but as something far bigger, for, like the best that our country can give us, it is of and for the people.